

P1 The 50 Best Places To Live

There are certain things a man wants out of a town: clean air, access to the outdoors, nice neighbors, maybe a good bar. We consulted our experts and amassed a huge database of towns just like that (with populations of about 50,000 or less). Then we conducted a rigorous analysis of everything from the price of land to cancer rates to the ratio of men to women. These are the top fifty, in order, with special attention to the best in each region. All that's left for you to do is move.

BEST ALL AROUND

1

Driggs, ID

ON THE SURFACE, it's every little town in the West. Driggs, Idaho. Just another twenty-five-mile-an-hour Main Street on your way to Bigger and Better. Forty-five minutes from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, walled on three sides by ice-pick mountains, teetering at the edge of a state known mostly for "Famous Potatoes" and tattooed fascists, it somehow begs for dismissal. But here's the thing with Driggs: What it don't have, you don't want. Grand Targhee Ski Resort sits twelve miles away. There's mountain biking and trout fishing out the back door, and climbing on both sides of the Tetons. But more than this, Driggs is a real town, a community. As Rich Rinaldi, backcountry guide and Nordic-skiing director for Grand Targhee, puts it, "If you're in a snowbank, and your hazards are on, and you've got a

POPULATION: 941
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME: \$26,604
MEDIAN HOUSE PRICE: \$86,200
LOCATION: 30 miles from Jackson, Wyoming; 285 miles from Salt Lake City
TERRAIN: Teton mountain wilderness
CLIMATE: 70 inches of snow in winter; 75 degrees and sunny in summer

THE REST OF THE BEST

Along with our highest-rated towns in each part of the country — as well as a few surprises, like the wildest, sexiest, and healthiest spots in America — these thirty-eight towns complete our top fifty. Don't let the brief write-ups deceive you. Any one of them could be your next home.

3 Mammoth Lakes, CA

POPULATION: 4,944 **LOCATION:** Eastern Sierras, 165 miles from Reno. **CLIMATE:** 80s in summer; 30s in winter, with deep powder. **SCENE:** Young, healthy, well-educated skiers.

6 Jackson, WY

POPULATION: 5,614 **LOCATION:** Teton wilderness, 273 miles from Salt Lake. **CLIMATE:** 70s in summer; teens in winter, with heaps of snow. **SCENE:** Old West meets ski money.

7 Bozeman, MT

POPULATION: 28,522 **LOCATION:** Big Sky Country, 80 miles from Yellowstone. **CLIMATE:** 80s in summer, teens in winter, with heavy snow. **SCENE:** Smart, burly, and antimaterialistic.

towrope, man, the first truck to come along is going to pull you out.”

Like almost every small town in the West, and perhaps more than most, Driggs finds itself polarized, split between the old-timers (in this case, Mormon potato farmers whose families have been in the valley for more than a century) and the relative newcomers, recreational immigrants with sunglasses on strings and pants made of everything but wool. If Driggs was a car, it'd be a tricked-out El Camino, tailgate smeared with the blood of last year's elk, hay scattered in the bed, a ski rack on the roof.

If you've been to Driggs, it's probably because of Targhee. With two thousand skiable acres, five hundred annual inches of snow (champagne powder, in chamber-of-commerce-speak), cat skiing, and three guest lodges, the resort is the recreational linchpin of the Teton Valley. But groomed slopes are only the most visible local skiing. It's the backcountry that lights up the locals. Clair Yöst, owner of Yöstmark Mountain Equipment, co-owner of Yöstmark Backcountry Tours, and, for the past twelve years, designer of his own line of telemark skis (the Mountain Noodle and the Classic Noodle), has been cutting tracks in the valley for most of his life. "You can ski the whole west side of the Tetons from here," he says. "You can drive to Teton Pass. Or you can stop at the state line and climb into the Mount Oliver area or West Burbank, some of the best backcountry runs you can find anywhere. And there's all kinds of skiing in the Big Holes and the Snake River Range. It just goes on and on and on."

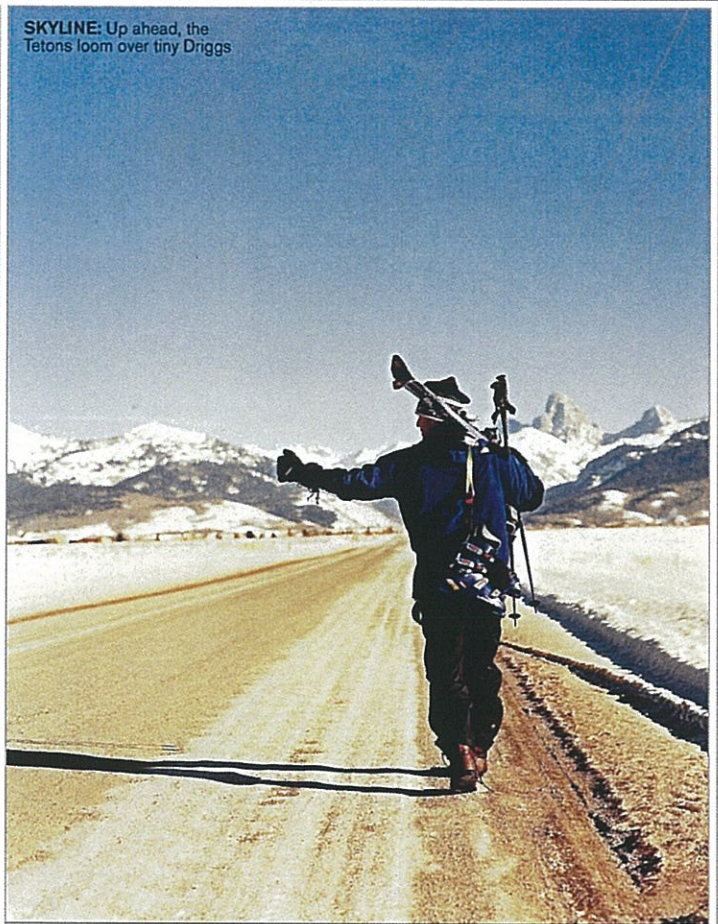
After the snow melts in the spring, the hundreds of miles of old logging roads and hiking trails around Teton Valley turn Driggs into a fat-tire Valhalla. Wendell Stam, owner of Big Hole Mountain Sports, came to the valley for the skiing, but stayed for the biking. "People ask me where the best trails are and I tell them, 'Close your eyes and point a finger,'" he says. "Per capita, the sheer number of trails is higher than almost any place I've seen."

The same mountains that make for good biking and skiing also feed the trout streams.

The area boasts a latticework of high-mountain brook-trout fisheries. The Teton River flows by three miles outside of town. The South Fork of the Snake is thirty minutes away. Henry's Fork is an hour. Fishing guide Mitch Prissel, who's been slinging flies in the valley for ten years, says, "You fish the Teton on a good day and you can catch thirty fish: rainbows, cuts, and brookies. Plus, most of the land around Driggs is still owned by the original families, so you can just knock on a door and ask for access."

Having so many daytime diversions, however, comes at a price. The nightlife in Driggs is anemic at best. There's a drive-in theater (the Spud) in the summer and a few places to get a microbrew, but the closest mixed drink is eight miles south, in Victor. The nearest gourmet meal is over the pass, in Jackson. But people don't come to Driggs for

SKYLINE: Up ahead, the Tetons loom over tiny Driggs



the eating or the drinking. They come because it ain't Aspen. They come because the price tag on a home in Jackson is twice what it is in Driggs.

There's no telling how long it's going to last, though. A snake in every garden. People complain that a new high school, built two years ago, is already overcrowded. The first stoplight in town will be installed this spring. Subdivisions and condominiums keep popping up like annoying, persistent flatulence. But having a beer in the Royal Wolf, a pizza at O'Rourke's, or a burrito at Hernandez's, or spending the night in the Pines Motel Guest Haus (a pine-paneled cross between a bed-and-breakfast and a ski chalet), you realize that in the grand karmic scheme of things, it somehow makes sense. The garden needs the snake. Driggs will change, sure, but it's the changing, the ephemerality, that makes it all so valuable. The trick is to catch it while it's still good.

-ALLEN JONES

NOTES: For skiing, contact Grand Targhee Resort (800-827-4433 or grandtarghee.com). For other sporting inquiries, try Yöstmark Mountain Equipment (208-354-2828 or yostmark.com) or Big Hole Mountain Sports (208-354-2209). If you're visiting, try the Pines Motel Guest Haus (208-354-2774), and if you decide to stay, contact American Realty West (208-354-2348). For more information, go to tetonvalleychamber.com.

[continued]

13 New Braunfels, TX

POPULATION: 33,906 LOCATION: Hill Country, 33 miles from San Antonio. CLIMATE: High 90s in summer; about 60 in winter. Dry. SCENE: BBQ-loving river rats and urban escapees.

14 Ouray, CO

POPULATION: 808 LOCATION: San Juan Mountains, 326 miles from Denver. CLIMATE: 70s in summer; 30s in winter, and icy. SCENE: Mining town turned sports Mecca.

15 Park City, UT

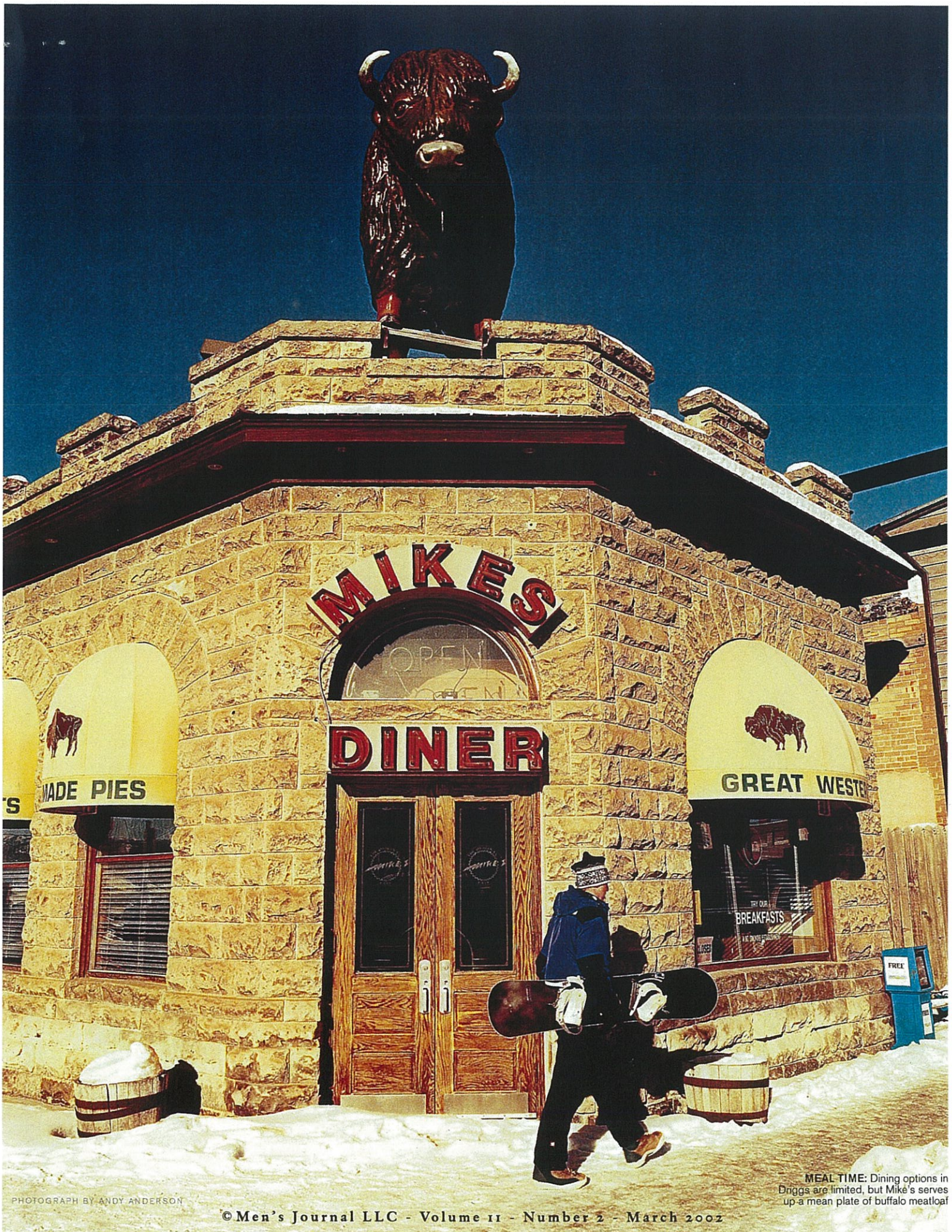
POPULATION: 6,117 LOCATION: Uinta Mountains, 28 miles from Salt Lake City. CLIMATE: 80s in summer; 30s in winter, with snow. SCENE: Olympic dream town full of well-scrubbed nonsmokers.

16 Ketchum, ID

POPULATION: 2,743 LOCATION: Sawtooth Range, 154 miles from Boise. CLIMATE: 80s in summer; 30s in winter; sunny all the time. SCENE: Getaways of the rich and outdoorsy.

17 Santa Cruz, CA

POPULATION: 51,155 LOCATION: Central Cal coast, 37 miles from San Francisco. CLIMATE: 60 to 80 degrees all year, damp in winter. SCENE: Surfboards, volleyballs, and weed.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDY ANDERSON

MEAL TIME: Dining options in Driggs are limited, but Mike's serves up a mean plate of buffalo meatloaf